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“Times of Life in Times of Change”

Sociological Perspectives on Time and the Life Course

Herwig Reiter, Benedikt Rogge and Nadine M. Schöneck

“Tempora mutantur ...” – this well-known quote on changing time had already become popular as the Middle Ages gave way to the dawn of the Modern Era. Today, some six centuries later, Western societies are defined by observations of rapid change with the diagnosis of ‘acceleration’ becoming commonplace in the social sciences. While some scholars regard acceleration as the characteristic feature of Late Modernity, there remain a number of other important social transformations to be observed. To name just a few: the worldwide economic crisis and its – by now almost chronic – consequences, the ongoing reorganisation of welfare systems, increasing global migration, the rising participation of women in the labour market, the casualisation of labour, and the growth of social inequalities.

“... nos et mutamur in illis” – historical change goes hand in hand with changes in the “time of its subjects”. They are inseparably bound to everyday life, to the construction of meaning, to social relations and to life courses and biographical accounts of the individual.

This Special Issue is concerned with the relationships between time and the life course. It is the outcome of an international workshop on “Times of Life in Times of Change – Sociological Perspectives on Time and the Life Course” that took place on the 25th and 26th of February 2011 at the Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg (HWK – Institute for Advanced Study) in Delmenhorst, Germany. During this workshop time sociologists and life course sociologists met, to our knowledge for the first time, in order to discuss theoretical and empirical commonalities and overlaps in their respective research fields, to present findings of recent empirical studies, and especially to discover the potential of each other’s perspective for their own research. The workshop aimed at initiating a dialogue between the primarily empirically oriented tradition of life course sociology and the so far rather theoretically oriented sociology of time. This volume seeks to consolidate the basis for continuing the fruitful exchange initiated during the workshop.

There are considerable links between the two fields making the dialogue self-evident. On the one hand, time is a fundamental category in life course sociology, yet it often remains implicit and under-theorised. On the other hand, time sociology has an interest in the relationships between “historical time” and “biographical time”, yet so far has barely been involved in conceptually reflecting upon life course categories and their temporal constitution. The preconditions for a productive exchange, however, are fulfilled. First of all, both time and life course sociology are characterised by a genuinely dynamic approach and a processual notion of social reality. Furthermore,

they share an “integrative” perspective (Ritzer 2003), i.e. a meta-theoretical point of view that attempts to overcome the old dualisms of social theory: agency and structure, objective conditions and subjective processes, whereby macro and micro levels are not considered as contradictions but are analysed together.

Bringing together the two fields introduces a variety of theoretical and empirical questions. Therefore, we are particularly glad that the authors of the eight contributions to this volume accepted the challenge to look at their respective research question from the perspectives of both life course sociology *and* time sociology, an enterprise that is by no means without risk and cannot be taken for granted. The present Special Issue includes original findings from empirical research as well as innovative conceptual studies at the intersection of life course and time sociology.

The first contribution delivers, as it were, a dialogical introduction to our subject: It presents extracts from an interview with Glen H. Elder, undoubtedly *the* pioneer of life course research, conducted by Matthias Pohl in spring 2011. Elder discusses the relationship between time and the life course as well as the issue of agency and, moreover, emphasises the interconnections between biographical and historical time: i.e. between everyday action, subjective meaning and time perspective on the one hand, and social and historical developments on the other. Interestingly, in Elder’s view social acceleration is by no means limited to the more recent past but characteristic of the entirety of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Matthias Wingens and Herwig Reiter discuss the dimension of time as a potential starting point for theoretical innovation in life course research, the main interest of which lies in analysing the interplay of *structure* and *agency* over time. Their contribution draws on Glen H. Elder’s research and discusses his programmatic and, first of all, empirically informed “principles of life course sociology”. In order to facilitate the theoretical advancement of the approach they suggest starting from key concepts of life course research such as “transition”, “trajectory”, and “turning point”. They conclude with a discussion of a variety of time sociological aspects of this theoretical perspective on the life course.

Hartmut Rosa adds to our understanding with a bird’s eye view of historical change and the altered conditions of life courses and biographies. Addressing the phenomenon of social acceleration, which he considers characteristic of Late Modernity, Rosa reflects upon its specific impacts on biographies and individual identity. Rosa describes ideal typical differences between Early, High and Late Modernity along the dimensions of “historical time”, “everyday time”, and “lifetime”. According to Rosa, the omnipresent phenomenon of acceleration places the identities of Late Modern individuals under severe pressure. In a nutshell, he observes a transition from positional identity processes (in High Modernity) to performative identity processes (in Late Modernity). He finally differentiates four stylised patterns of contemporary identity.

Nadine M. Schöneck’s contribution can be read as a direct response to Rosa and especially to his acceleration thesis. She confronts the inherently pessimistic diagnosis of a historical acceleration with empirical reality. The findings from her extensive mixed-methods study on people’s everyday lives reflect the perception of acceleration in daily routines. Schöneck distinguishes between four types of experiencing, thinking and “acting” time. Integrating the time sociological perspective with a life course

perspective she finally analyses the relevance of biographical processes for patterns of organising and experiencing time.

Vera King's contribution refers equally to Hartmut Rosa's acceleration thesis. King focuses on the consequences of social acceleration and changing time structures for the socialisation of children and for the transformation of inter-generational relationships. She discusses changes at the level of the individual life course, of the parent-child relationship, and of the alternation of generations. She finds that adult life courses are under pressure because they permanently need to be ready to "hit the road". Increasing needs to assimilate result in perceiving a decline of lifetime. This has consequences for a child's development and for young people who depend on the life courses of their parents. Besides, this perspective entails an increasing ambivalence in inter-generational relationships.

Julia Brannen combines her analysis of migration as a biographical turning point with a research question that is grounded in the theory of generations. Her empirical study investigates how "fathering", i.e. performing the role as a father, is inter-generationally transformed and reproduced across time and life courses in migrant families. Brannen depicts the findings from her interview study on Irish-born fathers and their sons and grandsons who had migrated to the United Kingdom. She characterises the fathering practices of her interviewees in terms of the continuities and discontinuities between generations. The transmission of the migration experience and of Irish identity conceptions is reflected in a distinct work ethic and in a rather traditional understanding of fatherhood among men of the second generation.

These two inter-generational contributions are followed by Benedikt Rogge's study on boredom as a specific form of subjective time experience. In the frame of three interview studies with students and unemployed people he explores the subjects' notions of boredom as well as their everyday time experiences. In this context he distinguishes between "situational boredom" and "agentic boredom". He conceives agentic boredom, the unpleasant sensation of "not knowing what to do", as characteristic of Late Modernity. Rogge finds that this feeling becomes more frequent especially during the early and late phases of life as well as during transitions, in the course of which old routines become obsolete and new ones need to be acquired. Furthermore, agentic boredom seems to be unequally distributed to the disadvantage of members of lower social strata and people with discontinuous (employment) biographies.

Ulrich Mückenberger's contribution concludes the Special Issue with a critical analysis of the anachronistic time political consequences for the life course of the "standard employment relationship" based in labour law. On the basis of the time political Manifesto "Time is Life" published by the German Society for Time Politics in 2005, Mückenberger programmatically pleads for the rejection of the standard employment relationship. Instead he promotes the establishment of a novel agreement based on the idea of a "right to one's own time". The article is dedicated to the late Helga Krüger. As co-author of the time political Manifesto she was perhaps one of the first life course sociologists who explicitly and critically dealt with the interrelationship between time and the life course.

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LITERATURE

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